

# A literary trail of crumbs: discovering the sources of Matthew of Edessa

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One of the most informative histories of medieval Byzantium, Syria, and the Caucasus is the chronicle of Matthew of Edessa. The chronicle is written in three books, and spans the years between 952 and 1136. It is written from the perspective of an ethnic Armenian living in a city that was alternately governed by the Byzantine Christians and the Arab Muslims during his lifetime.

The second and third books of the Chronicle, which record the events and aftermath of the First Crusade, are well-known to Western historians in particular. The seventy-eight years covered therein are treated in far more detail than the century prior to 1050, and Matthew's narrative is considered to be significantly more accurate as events move closer to his own lifetime.

Relatively little attention has therefore been given to the first book. Although it is not the focus of Matthew's history, book 1 is a rare, and valuable, specimen of historiography. Only two other Armenian sources survive from this period, and they do not overlap. The Universal History of Stephen of Taron ends shortly after 1000. The history composed by Aristakes Lastivert'i begins with an event recorded by Stephen in 1000, but does not begin its narrative in earnest until 1017. Book 1 provides the main Armenian corroboration for both of these histories, and contains a wealth of information not found in either.

The difficulty is presented by its shortcomings. It has been historically considered impossible to determine the sources Matthew used. His account bears so little surface resemblance to the histories of either Stephen or Aristakes that they have invariably been discounted as potential sources. His chronology is riddled with errors that are unique to his work. Since there has never been an understanding of his sources, no attempt has ever been made to understand the chronology or to identify the nature of the errors. A short description of Matthew and his work appears in a number of modern surveys of medieval Armenian literature; other surveys omit mention of him entirely. None of these descriptions suggest more than a superficial study of the text.

The problems of the first book are approachable, however. As it treats events before Matthew's lifetime, this is the book most likely to have been based primarily upon documentary sources. Some of the possible documentary sources remain in the historical record. It should therefore be possible to uncover similarities and differences between these texts and Matthew's.

The key to understanding Matthew's sources is to understand the chronological decisions he made when compiling the book. When the narrative themes within book 1 are isolated, and the

chronology within each of these themes is carefully and independently considered, similarities and differences in the chronological features begin to appear. From these thematic similarities, outlines of specific sources, both documentary and oral, begin to emerge.

For my analysis, I have taken apart each of Matthew's chronicle entries; noted the date under which it is recorded; noted any occurrence of the event along with its date, if given, in other surviving sources; and assigned it to a thematic category. When each category is considered separately from the rest of the chronicle, patterns of error or of correctness emerge that can be compared with the errors or accuracy of other histories. These are the patterns that constitute the "trail of crumbs" leading to Matthew's sources.

To give an example of my methods, I will discuss in detail my conclusions surrounding Matthew's best-known chronological mistake.

The chronicle is notorious for a glaring fifty-year offset error. Early in Book 1, he describes many contemporaneous events in Armenia and Vaspurakan, including the civil war that marked the beginning of the joint reign of Smbat-Hovhannes I and Ashot IV, who were the brother-kings who came to power between 1017-1021. Matthew's narrative of the events is consistent, detailed, and placed fifty years too early, in 971. The very well-dated history of Stephen of Taron, which ends in 1000, does not mention this war; the history of Aristakes does mention it, and clearly places it around 1017. If Matthew was using either of these sources, how could he have made such a glaring error? Given the error, could he possibly have had access to Stephen or Aristakes?

In one of his first entries, Matthew records the accession in 961 of a king called Gagik. He seems to be referring to Gagik I Bagratuni, although Gagik did not come to power until 990. He claims that Gagik "had not as yet occupied the royal throne of Armenia and the crown had not been placed upon his head", which suggests that the coronation was a formality. Matthew is the only source to suggest that there was a coronation in 961, or that a king of this era had been forced to delay his coronation. Some scholars, such as Nina Garsoïan, have traditionally accepted this date for the coronation of Ashot III Bagratuni, who had taken effective power in 952 after the death of his father Abas. Stephen's account may lend guarded support for this idea. He states that Smbat II, Ashot's son, became king "on the same day" of Ashot's death, and that Gagik I likewise became king "immediately after Smbat, on the same day." In contrast, Stephen makes no such statement for Ashot or for his father Abas. The Armenian royal succession was rarely straightforward, and it is possible that Ashot needed time to consolidate his power before he could be formally crowned.

Matthew names three other historical figures within the entry. The first, Anania Mokac'i, was *katholikos* of the Armenian church from the 950s until 975; he would have been present for any ceremony in 961 that called for the participation of the *katholikos*. The other two, the Albanian *katholikos* Hovhannes and the Albanian king P'ilippos, are problematic. A list of Albanian *katholikoi* through the late tenth century is given at the end of the History of Caucasian Albania, although it is preceded by a warning that "the works and dates and names of our spiritual leaders who succeeded each other from the beginning have been burned, and their testaments, vessels, and resting-places are unknown to us and have not been brought to light". In this reckoning, the Albanian *katholikos*

in 961 was named Gagik, not Hovhannes. But according to the history of Step'anos Orbelian, Gagik had died in 958, whereupon Anania consecrated a priest name David as the new katholikos. There is no certain record of the name of the Albanian king for this year, or of a ruler named P'ilippos. If some of the records had in fact been destroyed before the eleventh century, Matthew may have had an imprecise record of an Albanian katholikos Hovhannes and a contemporaneous Albanian king P'ilippos, and concluded that the record belonged to the era around 961.

It is impossible, absent external evidence, to be certain that there was a coronation this year. There is nothing in the epigraphic record during these years of Ashot's reign referring to a king, or any other ruler, of Armenia. Stephen of Taron's account gives a description of the intellectual and material prosperity in Armenia, and a character sketch of the king, but provides no clues concerning the events of his reign. Matthew does not normally demonstrate a habit of inventing names, places, and descriptive details when he has only a vague reference to an event. Given the level of detail in Matthew's description, and his reference to Anania, the katholikos who would have participated in a ceremony in 961, a belated coronation for Ashot remains a possibility.

The reason for the mis-identification of Ashot as Gagik becomes clear in the famously mis-dated entry that recounts the succession war between Gagik's sons, Smbat-Hovhannes I and Ashot IV. Matthew has dated this entry to the year 971. In fact, Gagik did not die until sometime between 1016 and 1020; his reign, as I mentioned, did not begin until 990. The scale of this mistake points to serious confusion on Matthew's part, but it does explain why he believed that the king crowned in 961 was named Gagik. If Matthew knew that a king was crowned in 961, and believed that Gagik died in 971, it could only have been he who was crowned in 961.

While the smaller problem posed by the first entry may thus be solved, the larger problem posed by the mis-dating of this one is not. There was no succession in 971. Ashot III died in 977; his son Smbat II died in 990. This placement cannot be explained as a simple case of mistaken identity. It may, however, be partially explained as one. Maybe Matthew, lacking a list of Armenian kings and their dates, knew that a king called Ashot (that is, Ashot III) occupied the throne in this year, and at some later point in time there was a king called Smbat (that is, Smbat II). In addition, he knew that a king called Ashot (in this case, Ashot IV) had fought with a brother named Smbat over the succession; they were forced to share power, and for rest of their respective reigns there was both a king Ashot and a king Smbat. The full name of the latter was Smbat-Hovhannes, and Matthew consistently refers to him as Hovhannes, but there are multiple inscriptions that name him simply as Smbat. It therefore seems likely that simple mis-identification may account for part of Matthew's error; the mis-identification of Gagik for Ashot III in the earlier entry would then have been a "correction" of the name of the rival kings' father, who preceded them as king.

There remains the question of how Matthew concluded that the events in this entry belonged to the year 971 in particular. An examination of the entire set of events for this year shows that they are internally consistent. The second, an account of the contemporaneous neighbouring rulers, correctly lists the kings of Kars and Albania during the civil war. The third describes the death of an Armenian prince named Apirat at the hands of Abu'l-Uswar, the emir of Dvin; external sources

verify that Abu'l-Uswar was the emir of Dvin by 1022 (AE470/1). The fourth, which describes an invasion of Daylamite Muslims into Bjni, has been externally dated to 1021, based on Arab sources. The entry also describes the death of a warrior called Vasak. There is some disagreement in the secondary sources as to the year of Vasak's death; however, the date of 1021 is a plausible option.

All of the evidence indicates very strongly that this entry should have been placed in the year 1021. Admittedly, this placement is slightly problematic. Matthew refers to Senek'erim, the king of Vaspurakan, who by many accounts had migrated to Sebasteia around 1016. The sequence of events in Bagratid Armenia between 1016 and 1021 is also very murky. No contemporary source gives a plausible date for the death of Gagik. Although the extant epigraphy suggests that Hovhannes was king in Ani as of 1017, Gagik may have died as late as 1020. It seems likely that Matthew, working from two or more sources, chose to follow a source that suggested a later placement for the civil war in Ani, and another source that suggested an earlier placement for the annexation of Vaspurakan. He did not go to great lengths to reconcile the sources, but instead left conflicting clues in the two sets of entries.

If this group of entries should have been dated to 1021, why then did Matthew choose 971? There is a certain numerical tidiness in the mistake, but that alone does not explain it. One might be able to make a case that the mistake was due to transcription error; the Armenian letters used to represent the two dates have a somewhat similar shape, particularly in certain handwriting samples. The existence of a fifty-year gap, however, stretches this explanation too far. There must be another reason to support this chronological placement, and I believe that it may be found in a closely subsequent entry.

This entry is primarily known for its inclusion in full of two letters that the emperor John Tzimiskes wrote to Ashot III. It begins with the gathering of all the Armenian noble houses and their armies under Ashot in Hark'. The nobility was summoned in order to meet Tzimiskes, provide him with troops for the Byzantine campaign against the Muslims, and possibly to subtly warn Tzimiskes against invading Christian Armenia. The list of princes given in this entry is striking in its inaccuracy for the year 972. It is, in fact, comprised almost entirely of those who ruled in the year after the civil war of Ani—according to all accounts save Matthew's, the years between 1018 and 1022.

If Matthew had in fact confused Ashot III with his grandson Ashot IV, and knew that, in 972, Ashot had called together the princes and armies of Armenia, he might have filled in the names of some princes based on his documentary knowledge of Ashot IV's contemporaries. He would have naturally concluded that it was Ashot and not Hovhannes who gathered the armies. Of the brothers, Hovhannes was the civilian; his dominion was within the city of Ani, whereas Ashot's was the land outside Ani. Matthew was then able to arrive at a date for the previous entry: as late as possible before this gathering, or 971. Only the need to explain the activities of a king named Ashot in the era around 971 is sufficient to explain the fifty-year misplacement of the entry, the misidentification of the king Gagik for Ashot III, and the misidentification of most of the princes who gathered at Hark'.

Matthew's account of the civil war shares many details with that of Aristakes. His dating methods, combined with his confusion over the names of the Armenian kings, led him to reject Aristakes' dating of the civil war to 1017, but his material seems to have come largely from that source. It is combined with a great deal of material about events in Vaspurakan, that Aristakes did not cover; this could well have been a lost history of the Arcrunis, which came to Matthew from Sebasteia. The co-incidence of dating suggests that this lost Arcruni history was one of the earliest to date the civil war to 1021 rather than 1017. This is not the best example to demonstrate Matthew's use of Stephen of Taron, whose history did after all end in 1000. The surrounding entries on other themes -- particularly that of Byzantine history -- does display marked coincidence of content and chronology, which leads me to believe that Matthew did use Stephen as a source -- though not his only one -- for these years.

Matthew's history, and in particular Book 1, has never been very well understood. As a result, it has been treated with general suspicion by modern historians of the century between 950 and 1050. The chronological errors have been observed, but never studied; conversely, some of the dates Matthew gives have been uncritically accepted, without an understanding of the scope for error. A knowledge of the links between Book 1 and the other extant sources, both Armenian and non-Armenian, as well as an understanding of how Matthew arrived at the chronological conclusions he did, will enable us to rely more firmly upon aspects of his information. There are rationales for the vast majority of his dates, and certain groups of entries have an internally consistent chronology. Instead of arbitrarily accepting or rejecting the dates given, it is more useful to isolate and understand the particular errors, and their relationship to each other. The knowledge of Matthew's source material that arises from this understanding allows us to realise in what particular ways, and upon what particular themes, Matthew diverges from other contemporary sources. Matthew's history may then be treated in a more positive manner, and the information contained therein may be more confidently used.